METROPOLIS

THE BIG O ZINE

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Twenty-two artists and writers collaborated together to create a labor of love dedicated to the cult classic anime: The Big O. We encourage our readers to check out the contributors' social media at the end of the zine.

November 2020

EVEN WITHOUT THE EVENTS OF FORTY YEARS AGO, MAN WOULD STILL BE A CREATURE WHO FEARS THE DARK.

THERE ARE THOSE WHO TURN THEIR EYES AWAY,

AND THERE ARE THOSE WHO TRY TO SEE THROUGH THE FEAR AND CONQUER IT.

ARE YOU SOMEONE WHO CAN FACE IT?

BIG O!

MAN IS A CREATURE WHO FEARS THE DARK.

AS A MAN, MY PURPOSE IN THIS WORLD IS KNOWLEDGE.

BUT NO ONE HERE IS INTERESTED IN LEARNING THE TRUTH A TRUTH THAT MUST BE KNWON.

HE DOESN'T FACE THAT FEAR HE AVERTS HIS EYES FROM THAT FEAR...

AND ACTS AS IF HE NEVER HAD ANY MEMORIES OF HIS LIFE, HIS HISTORY, FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.

It's
SHOWTIME!

elliemars

PARADIGM CITY EVENING POST

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Who is the Negotiator? - Exclusive Interview Within

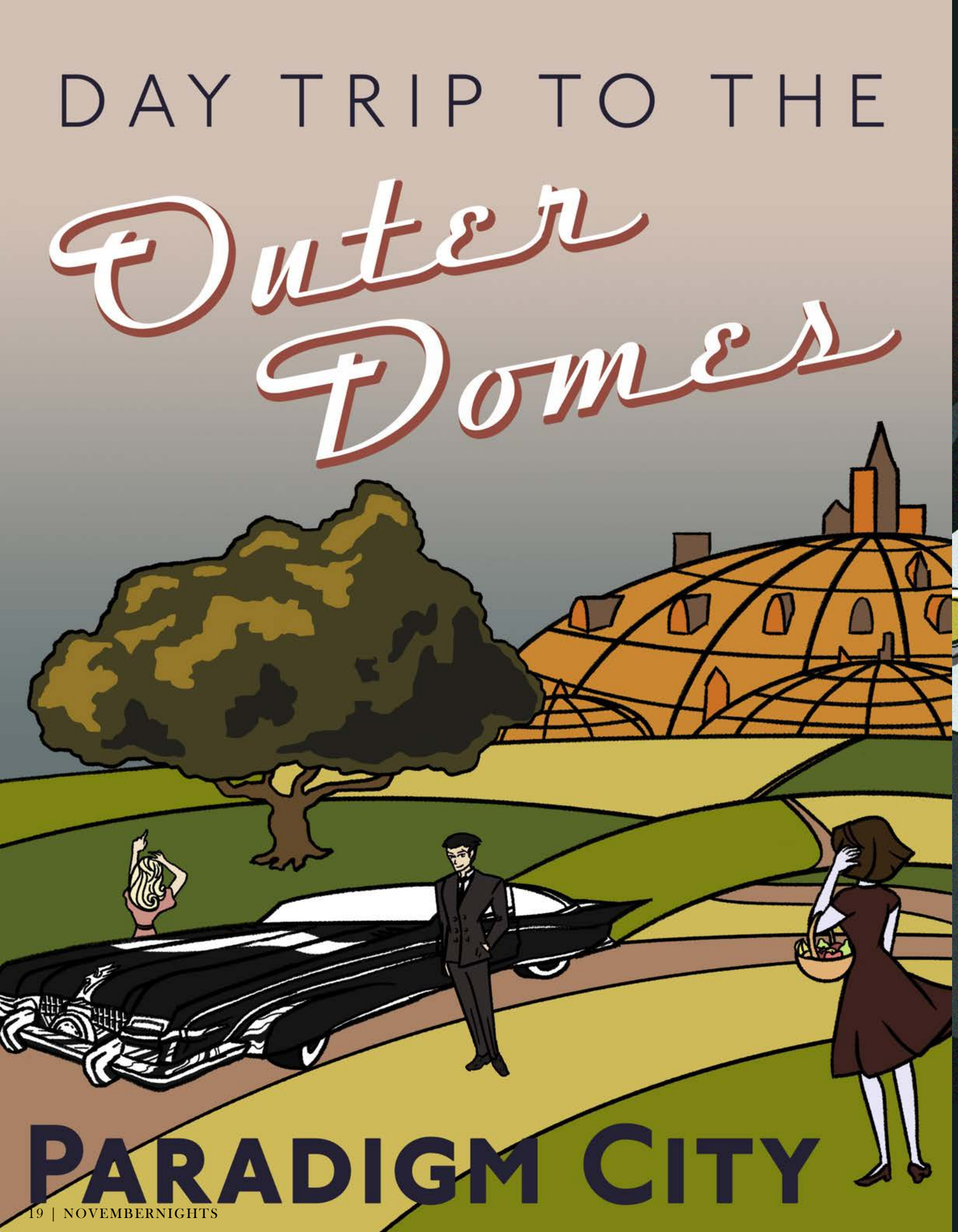
CAST IN THE NAME OF GOD

THE BIG O

PARADIGM CITY

DAY TRIP TO THE

Outer Domes



PARADIGM CITY

THE LINE BETWEEN US

BY MAB

We could have made them look like anything but we made them look like us.
- Austin Walker, COUNTER/Weight 00

R. Dorothy Wayneright always knew her place in relation to the humans in her life.

Miguel Soldano, who expected nothing of her but to be a representation of his skills and ego. Timothy Wayneright, who looked at her and saw someone else but otherwise expected nothing of her beyond the occasional song.

Dorothy Wayneright herself, the girl she was modeled after. Who had no opinions, being dead and gone. Who was a memory that no one could cling to long enough for it to mean anything.

It never used to bother her until she began to live with Roger Smith.

("Stop trying to imitate us," Roger says in *that tone*, the one where she can't tell if he's annoyed or tired or just saying it because it's routine at this point.)

She doesn't know how to respond to that. Does she want to be someone else — the girl she was modeled after? In another life, in another city, Dorothy the girl who would sing to her father. The alternate reality where she never met Roger Smith, where she never died and became immortalized as an android.

It's an idle daydream, if even that. Can androids dream? Can they long for something they know, logically, is out of reach and never could exist within the confines of reality — due to the path those in the past had taken, setting this future in motion.

Dorothy likes to think that she dreams.

And in those dreams, she indulges in a different reality. It is exactly the same as the one she is in, which makes it easier to believe. It is exactly the same in every respect, except in that one, Roger does not give her *that look*, the one he gets when he forgets that she is an android.

He either always remembers, or he never knew to begin with, but in her different reality, he doesn't *forget*.

—

The thing about *fear* is that it tends to linger in a myriad of tiny, infuriatingly human ways.

But what does she know about being human? Where does she get to be able to compare this jolt that runs through her systems like electricity when she first hears the voice of the Archetype to the way she found Roger crumpled on the floor of the subway tunnel. The fear that made his voice tremble and his skin break out in sweat.

Is it *fear* if she does not experience those same things?

("I know you can't feel terror," Roger says as they walk down the tunnel together. "Do you care to know what it's like?"

She didn't, then, never wanted this. Never wanted to understand. Never should have understood.)

The Archetype doesn't speak in words. Not in the same way that she does, that humans do. It speaks in promises, in threats, in a string of zeros and ones that transcends language. But she understands it intrinsically.

And when it speaks, she *feels* for the first time. She recognizes the emotion for what it is, in the echo of the same fear she saw on Roger's face.

Her knees lock and her legs turn to jelly — a strange sensation for a girl with perfect poise and posture, to suddenly feel the pistons and servos of her joints simply give up — how human a sensation, she thinks, as she fights to stay upright.

We are the same, you and I, the Archetype says without words. *We remember.*

Dorothy doesn't remember. She is built in honor of a memory, but she has none of her own. That is not what scares her, though.

What scares her is that she *could* be like this thing. Huge, powerful, forgotten beneath the city. Hungry and *angry* and desperate to reclaim its place.

What scares her is the force of its desires, and how, when its whispers fill the underground cavern, she believes (if only for a moment) that she, too, wants these things.

—

("There are those who would turn away from something that frightens them," Roger says, as they walk down that hall together, towards the thing that made him so afraid. "And there are those who would try to see it for what it is.")

This thing, this beast, this *monster*, it is not like her. She knows this. She knows that she is *nothing* like it, that even Dorothy-1 is not like it — though it is the Archetype, it is the root of their creation, it is the initial stave that the melody is then improvised upon.

It cannot be allowed to exist. It should not have ever existed. And in its voice, the chords that pulse through her, send her stumbling and running in an ungraceful gait, she hears it calling to her.

Calling her sister, daughter. Calling her coward.

("Remember," Roger says, as she gives in to that strange, primal urge to flee. "You don't need to feel fear.")

She doesn't. She shouldn't.

But she does.

("Take a good look," Roger says, as Big O's arm swings overhead and collides with the Archetype's grin. "That thing is a monster that's got nothing to do with you.")

Dorothy stops. She turns. And she looks.

I am not afraid of you, she thinks.

You should be. The broken array of lights flicker and spark behind its broken panels. It seethes and wheezes and stares straight down at her.

She stares back, defiant. *I am not like you, and I am not afraid of you.*

—

Roger's words are oddly reassuring. They have that effect on people.

They apparently have that effect on androids as well.

—

"How is it, Roger Smith, that you are alright with Instro?"

The words slip out before she can stop them, and if she could feel shame, she imagines that she might feel it right then.

But in this reality, the one where she is an android, she does not feel. She cannot feel, should not, does not.

He doesn't take his eyes from the road as he drives through puddles that have never quite dried out from the last rain, through empty streets, the piano echoing faintly in the back of their minds. "What, you mean his piano playing? I told you, he has heart."

She can feel her lips flicker into a frown — just for the briefest of moments, but it's enough to make her wonder over it. "No, I mean... him."

"You're going to have to be more specific."

"He and I are the same."

Roger snorts and doesn't bother with the turn signal as he cuts between two trucks. "You two aren't anything alike."

Dorothy doesn't react, because she doesn't know how she would be expected to in this kind of situation. "I cannot help but feel that you are insulting me."

("Stop trying to imitate us," goes unspoken.)

"You are both functionally different models. He has the hands of a pianist. Well, he *had*." Roger frowns at this, and Dorothy takes the opportunity to study the way the expression sits on his face. The way the lines around his mouth crease — how this frown is different from the one that she saw that morning when she woke him up at exactly 12:03:57 with her piano playing. That frown, then, had sat heavy between his brows.

This one is light, the slightest pull at his lips. She can't see his eyes behind his sunglasses, and he still refuses to look away from the road.

I heard what you said to him, Dorothy wants to say. *I heard how you said Instro was so human, and you didn't say it like an insult.*

What would he say to that? Would he try to cover his mistake, would he try to apologize? Would he give another flimsy excuse?

Instro, she knows, will be valuable — a valuable companion and teacher. She is not mad at him because she doesn't know how to be.

Then what is this emotion that she feels towards Roger? As he compliments this other android so easily, as he refuses to look at her and answer her question.

By the time she thinks she might have a decent response to that, it is far too late. They pull into the underground garage of the bank that Roger made his home, and he turns to Norman about dinner.

Dorothy knows that she should follow behind him to the dining room, but she lingers at the piano for just a moment.

Longing, she thinks, as her slender fingers stroke the keys without the slightest hint at pressure. That is what she feels, but she does not know the source of it.

She doesn't think she wants to know, and she closes the case over the keys before leaving the room.

—

The cat named Pero seems so small and fragile. She knows she could hurt it so easily, if she was any less careful.

Roger stands just behind her, back to the broken pillar, as he considers the overcast sky. "You know you can't keep it," he says, in a soft voice, like he's sorry he has to say such a thing to her.

Why would be the correct question. *Clearly no one else did.* But Dorothy has to stop and consider this want, this need.

She who has no wants, no needs. Do protocols count as needs? The compulsion to follow a directive — how does that fit in with wants and needs?

He does not believe that she wants to protect this small and fragile cat with such a fierce longing that even she is startled by it. Not that it shows on her face at all.

So instead, she says, "Then it is simply a matter of your affections being put to the test." She knows where her affections, such as they are, lie. (She does not know if she means his affections towards her, or towards small and fragile creatures in general.)

Roger sputters in surprise, and Dorothy shifts the slightest degree to preempt any escape attempt Pero might make out of surprise. But the kitten sleeps on, content, despite Roger's noise. "An android talking about affections?" he says, and she looks at him to see what sort of expression he makes as he once again insults her.

Let Instro play the piano, that is one thing. His love and concern for his late father is another. He and Dorothy are nothing alike, he can have that affection when she cannot.

The moment their eyes meet, what little color there is in Roger's cheeks drains to an embarrassed pallor. "I'm sorry," he says, and she wonders what sort of expression *she* is making to cause him to apologize. She doesn't know if she wants to believe that he's correcting himself because he's learned.

Though, perhaps...

He does look truly apologetic when he tells her to find Pero's owners. That someone out there who loves the cat would very much like him back. He doesn't seem to understand that she also loves the cat very much.

Or she is overwhelmed with the desire to protect this cat.

Is that a directive? To *do no harm* to the creature that cannot protect itself against her?

Is that affection, or is that programming?

Is an emotion not a result of preconceived impressions — of the brain's chemical reaction based on previous encounters and stories, a code of human design instead of a string of zeros and ones.

A human is built on a core database of memories, which inform their own sort of programming language. Forty years ago, all beings, humans and androids, lost their memories. But they have formed new ones in the time since.

Dorothy feels affection towards this cat — towards...

Well, it doesn't matter. He wouldn't understand.

—

In the end, Dorothy does as she is told.

An order is an order. Her directive is in her programming.

In the end, it doesn't make a difference.

In the end, perhaps, it is her affection that allows her to get taken as well.

—

Smoke and rain and ash and, beneath it all, burning flesh. The sting of chemicals. The distant howls of pain at the memory of the captivity, howls of freedom as they are broken back down into composite pieces.

Into smoke and rain and ash.

Her gut churns, or it feels like it does. What bits and pieces of her move in such a way that make her feel like this?

Roger's hand is at her back, turning her away from the wreckage of the building. He is speaking softly — to someone, not her. To Dastun, perhaps. Their voices are low, muted. Barely audible over the rain.

It feels like mourning. It feels like the muffled conversation that happened around her at Doctor Wayneright's funeral. Are they worried about hurting her feelings? Did they *forget* that she does not have any?

No, that's a lie.

Dorothy knows, deep down, that that is a lie.

Eugene, for all his failings, taught her *disgust* and *revulsion*. Perhaps he also taught her *sorrow*.

("Memories of the girl she was modeled after. Is it possible she's being ruled by the memories of that dead girl?"

Dorothy wants to tell him that no, these feelings are her own. What the human Dorothy knew and understood was shaped by her experiences.

Just as she, R. Dorothy, understands: she should not be able to feel these things, and yet she does. She is this way because of her own experiences. They are her emotions, and no one else's.)

—

He looks at her as they stand across the roof from one another, and a question that isn't hers, shouldn't be hers — can't be hers, but is — rises up in her thoughts.

Dorothy wants to know, but at the same time doesn't. Is that a logical feeling to have, for an android that shouldn't feel?

He waits, patiently, a softness to his expression that she studies, and wonders what it means.

So she asks, because she doesn't know not to. "If neither of us had memories, and we met... would you and I fall in love as well?"

Roger doesn't answer her. He dances around the question with all the grace of a three-legged service bot.

Dorothy doesn't press him for an answer because it was a foolish question anyway. She doesn't want to know the answer. She doesn't. (She does. Distantly. A small part of her does. The Dorothy who used to be human, who would sing for her father, who would walk down the street and meet a man dressed all in black and find him charming.)

(These are not her memories. They belong to no one. They belong to that idle daydream, the different reality, where Roger does not forget because either he does not know or he does not care, but *he does not forget*.)

—

At what point does an android gain their autonomy?

Dorothy acts and thinks for herself, the same way any human does. Instro, though he does not look like her, has the ability to play the piano in a way that elicits strong emotions from his listeners. That is not programming.

That is, what humans would call, having heart.

At what point does an android differ from a megadeus?

Dorothy wonders over the Archetype's words, *we are the same you and I*, and Dorothy watches Schwarzwald's megadeus, the Big Duo, as it crawls out of the pit without a pilot.

I am not like you, she had thought then, as she screamed and sang its tune. As she felt herself become the melody written over its staves.

And watching Big Duo experience fear the same way she did — that need for self preservation, that *need* to get as *far away as possible*, she wonders...

Where is the line between us?

—

The Leviathan beneath the surface of the city asks her the same question. Like the Archetype, it speaks in strings of code that she interprets without a second thought.

We are the same, you and I, it tells her, but this time she is not afraid. She is not afraid.

She is not.

"I don't know," she confesses as she stands on the precipice, listening to its roar of machinery and the rumble of destruction. It feels so vulnerable to say, so human. To not know something, to not truly understand it. "Are we the same?

You've lost your..." Dorothy struggles to think of the right word. The word that would describe them best. "You've lost your conscience."

It feels so human to say, so vulnerable.

Where is the line, between monster and machine? Which is she?

Memory, monster, machine. They are all the same, they are all different. They have their own thoughts and patterns and feelings and emotions.

They are all these things, they are tangled together, and they are linked. Memory and monster and machine forming a chain, wrapped around her ankles and around her wrists and her neck and strangling her.

"I can't be a part of you," she says, and it sounds like an apology. "No one can."

She stands her ground, because *she is not afraid*. Her body trembles, but she passes that off to the way that the building bucks and sways beneath her.

She stands her ground, until it erupts beneath her.

Big O, empty, *angry* and afraid and protective.

Big O, autonomous.

But she can feel Roger's emotions, and she is not afraid.

—

Dorothy watches Kelly Fitzgerald for any of the signs that she is so used to seeing — trying to find the slight hesitation before her hand lands on her husband's shoulder, trying to find the way her gaze won't quite reach — but she finds none of them.

There is no pause, there is no hesitation.

There is grief, and that is real. It is raw and broken and bleeding as she clutches the pieces of her husband's head.

Dorothy watches this, and she wonders, *Is this what it means to love?*

She doesn't look at Roger. Because this is not that reality, and he did forget.

Instead, she watches Kelly, and she wonders if this emotion inside of her is *mourning*.

—

Curiosity, even in humans, is considered a flaw.

When she hears the song, Dorothy goes anyway.

She doesn't know why. Perhaps it is that piece inside of her that is always chasing a song — on the piano, at the microphone, lifted from the throats of a dozen political dissidents.

Angel is there, which isn't a surprise.

Angel looks like she regrets everything, which *is* a surprise.

Uncharitably, Dorothy has always wondered if the woman would know an honest emotion even if it walked up to her wearing a black suit.

And when Angel spots her, and recognizes her, Dorothy realizes that yes, perhaps, Angel does know that honest emotion.

Dorothy wonders if she hates Angel for it — if this ugly, twisted emotion inside of her now is the one that she experienced when she found the lipstick stained cigarette butts, the one when she watched Roger's gaze slide to the blonde every time.

Is this hate?

In the end, it's not the right time to consider it, because then there is Allen Gabriel, and there is fear and something else that might also be hate — and the emotions aren't just Dorothy's, they're Angel's.

—

"Run," he says. "Run away, little doll."

And so she does, because it's a command as much as it is a taunt. And he is still human enough that her brain doesn't know the difference.

He catches her because he is not human enough to fail. He is different enough to terrify her, but not the way that the Archetype or the Leviathan did. Those were fears rooted deep in herself, in her own sense of identity.

The fear he instills in her is as different as he is.

It is numbingly human, and that is how he catches her. Because he is not human enough, and she is too human when it counts.

(*Androids that live with a human long enough come to understand human emotions*, she heard once.)

Her leg hurts, not because she has the nerve endings to feel it, but because a part of her knows that this is the response that should be had when your hamstring is shot. Her arm hangs limp at her side. Pistons and servos, not muscle and blood.

Allen knows how to dismantle both, because he is made of both.

He's speaking as he towers over her, though it's not to her. It's to Angel, her voice thin and strained and barely audible over the whirling metal hand as it bores down on her. "*Angel*," he says, voice dripping with sweetness and mockery. "Don't you think it'll help our mission if I humiliate the man who cares for this android more than anyone?" Allen grins, all teeth, all unnatural angles, but his words aren't meant for Dorothy even as he studies the shape she makes beneath his foot, splayed out on the platform.

It's enough to get Angel to hesitate. To lower her gun. To look at Dorothy like *she* is at fault for all of this.

Dorothy wants to tell her that she's wrong. That he won't come, because it's not like that. That he won't come, because he's not a fool.

That he won't come, because he doesn't know. How can he know?

That doesn't change the fact that a small, tiny part inside of her, the one that screams and thrashes against this thing on top of her, the one that sobs and beats her fists against the confines of an android's emotions, hopes that she's wrong.

—

No, Dorothy thinks, as her fingers curl into a fist. *Roger doesn't need to come and save me. It isn't like that, and he isn't a fool.*

She punches Allen before his drill can do more than clip her fringe. Dorothy regains her feet, albeit unsteadily, and dares him to take another step towards her.

"Damn you, little puppet," he growls, but the humor is still there. The too-sharp grin still cuts the edges of his mouth like a blade. His movements are fluid, unnatural, as he pushes himself upright to stand across from her.

He lunges, and she dodges. What need does she have of fear? Send an android to fight a cyborg. She should not have allowed herself to run. She should have stood to face him, and now he has the upper hand.

"Where are you going to jump to next?" Allen asks, as she wobbles on the railing over a pit.

If she had full control of her faculties, she could easily make the jump back to solid ground. She could easily lose him in the tunnels.

But instead she stands there, uncertain, and considers.

He starts to move towards her, what would possibly be the final blow, before the screeching of tires and glare of headlights charges towards them from down the abandoned tunnel.

Dorothy knows that it's Roger, even with the wail of the police siren. She would know his driving anywhere.

The car pulls to a stop, Roger steps out and his eyes find hers immediately. Like they could look nowhere else but *her*, and she doesn't know what that means. Roger, whose gaze would always slip to Angel whenever she was in a room, looks at Dorothy.

The lines of his face drawn, serious. The corners of his mouth pinched in concern. No sunglasses to hide his eyes this time. The whole of his emotion, on display.

She doesn't know what that means.

The relief? The satisfaction? The inexplicable emotion that she feels at that subtle choice — how he glances briefly at Angel but returns to Dorothy without hesitation. That he turns to her *first*.

—

Smug is a new feeling, as Angel flees. *Proud* is another, as Roger charges at Allen without fear.

—

It's a soft give and take, banter unable to fully smother the concern beneath. Dorothy likes who she is when they are together, when they work together.

Roger doesn't have to carry her, but he does, and she lets him.

And when she grabs his watch, so that he can accept the call, he gives her a relieved and fond smile. "Thank you, Dorothy," he says, unwilling to let her go.

(At least, that is what she imagines what it means, in this alternate reality where she is allowed this indulgence.)

Dorothy removes herself from his grip. It was kind of him, but unnecessary. The indulgence is over. "Next time," she says, with a new kind of bravery, "you'll be the one to take me home."

Roger doesn't turn from her, tracking her movement with his dark eyes. The whole of his emotion, written across his face. He doesn't answer, but he doesn't need to.

She understands.

—

"I am what I am, I am not like those robots or Roger." She is not like the other androids. She is not like Allen Gabriel. Or Big O. She is not human.

There is fear in Norman's voice, confusion and concern. How is it that humans are always so afraid, so confused? "What are you going on about, Dorothy?"

In the end, she lets herself get taken. They are here for her, not for Norman. Not for Big O.

Not for Roger, when he sweeps in to save the day like always.

She does not regret, because she does not know how. Not really. She does not regret because she can't, because this is the choice she made for herself. "I am what I am, Roger, I will always have this same body, and this same heart."

Pistons and servos, not muscle and blood: That is what makes her function.

But memories, and emotions, that is what makes her R. Dorothy Wayneright.

His expression shifts, honest emotion written clearly over every angle of it. The fear, the desperation, the pain at her words. "As strong as you are, you can break free!" he shouts, as he strains to reach for her.

Her heart breaks, a little, but she is not afraid. The distance grows between them, and he reaches for her, but it is not enough. It will never be enough. "You have to take control of your own destiny!"

—

Roger's words are oddly reassuring. They have that effect on Dorothy.

This is not the end, she thinks, as she closes her eyes and lets the robot carry her away.

—

("Dorothy," Roger says, his voice low and broken in a way she was not used to being directed to her. "Since you first came to live here, I feel like I've known you forever."

The girl who would sing for her father, who meets the man dressed all in black.

"You know, I never answered that question you had asked me awhile ago, did I? You had asked, if you had been human, instead of an android, would you and I have fallen in love..."

That different reality, the one so close to this one. It is exactly the same in every respect, except in that one, she is human.

"If things had been different like you said, then maybe we would have. That's my answer to you."

That she is human, herself but human. Her lived experiences and memories, not a girl dead and gone and immortalized in an android. They are two different people.

"And please don't tell me that I'm dodging the issue. Right now, I can't seem to commit to one truth. But I know that I won't waver in doing what needs to be done, or in going down the path that I have to take."

As strong as you are, you can break free, he told her not too long ago. The last time she saw him. The time she should have said goodbye, because it would have been easier than this. *You have to take control of your own destiny.*

She wishes she could tell him the same thing now.

His hand reaches for her, wavers, then falls back to his side. "Wait for me.")

—

Roger Smith, the Negotiator. He has saved Paradigm City more times than it even knows. He has saved Dorothy several times, in his own way.

Always the gentleman. Always the knight in shining armor. Always always *always* putting himself out in front — despite fear, despite not knowing, despite everything.

He does this all because he believes in something, and even when that faith is ripped out from underneath him, still he keeps fighting.

—

Dorothy saves him, right before the end. She has saved him before, but this is the last time.

This is their relationship, this give and take. This partnership. Human and android.

With him, she is without fear. With him, she will help change the destiny that is a forgotten memory, scrawled upon blank pages.

And in the end, it's his stupid, fearless, *beautiful* humanity that saves them all, one last time.

THE PLEASING DECAY OF PARADIGM CITY

BY STEPHEN HERO

Nearly 15 years after The Big O premiered in 1999, Kazuyoshi Katayama, the series director, sat down with mangaka Hiro Sono for an interview. The two found a cozy café tucked away near the banks of the Samida River. As they languidly sipped their coffee, Katayama reflected on the show's origins. Tellingly, he didn't focus on characters or major story beats; instead, he repeatedly referred to its "style" and "image," making it clear that the creative team prioritized aesthetics first.

Which makes sense.

Since debuting, fans have lionized The Big O for its unique atmosphere and ponderous approach to storytelling. Bobduh, an animation critic, praises its "intelligent, aesthetically thrilling fusion of visual and narrative design." Katayama and his creative partner, Keiichi Sato, were inspired by the pulpy "sci-fi films from the 1950s and 1960s" and wanted The Big O to feel retro. Hence the gadgetry and goofy robots.

However, premeditated or not, The Big O might owe more to the visual stylings of Western Romantic art than twentieth century pop culture. While the connection might seem arbitrary, The Big O shares a lot in common with the aesthetic categories that dominated the European art world approximately two centuries ago. Specifically, it employs a quality known as the "picturesque" to express the feelings of poignant isolation and haunting melancholy that permeate Paradigm City and contribute to its distinct mood.

"A civilization without a history"

The "picturesque" is tough to define. Unless you majored in art history or avidly read Romantic literature, you might lack the terminology to properly express this aesthetic category. Even critics well-versed in this stuff have difficulty defining its unique qualities. From the Italian pittoresco, which literally translates to "from a picture," the picturesque captures the comfort one derives from quaint scenes in nature. Imagine hiking through an unfamiliar forest only to stumble upon a solitary cottage. Rabbits dart in between moss-eaten fence posts as a steady stream of smoke wafts from the chimney. The sun is rapidly setting, but for a moment you feel comforted by this delightful sight. That's picturesque.

Specifically, artists who felt compelled to capture this feeling gravitated to ruins, which formed "an important element within the visual vocabulary of the picturesque" (Tiffin 525). The European countryside, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was dotted with medieval structures—crenelated castles, hollowed-out monasteries, ancient abbeys—slowly being reclaimed by nature and the vicissitudes of time. These crumbling structures captured the public's imagination. There's something indescribably pleasing about dilapidation. As Paul Youngquist and Orrin Wang point out, "ruins invited spectators' reflections on transience, death, and decay." They provided an environment that encouraged idle contemplation, a place where travelers could feel the passage of time without interruption, establishing an almost spiritual sense of ease.

Romantic writers strove to include the picturesque in their stories to appeal to a fervent readership. Think back to high school English and you'll be reminded of similar scenes. Touring the Swiss countryside, Victor Frankenstein spotted "ruined castles hanging on the precipices of piny mountains" and "cottages...peeping forth from among the trees." The "principal feature" of Edgar Allan Poe's titular Usher House "seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity," its walls discolored and overspread with fungi. Even the narrator of Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter waxes poetic about the "decayed wooden warehouses" and "public edifices, ancient in date and quaint in architecture" that lined the streets of Salem, Massachusetts.

But what do these intellectual concepts have to do with The Big O? A lot, in fact.

In the first of his many monologues, Roger Smith introduces viewers to Paradigm City. "One day forty years ago," he begins, "everyone here lost their memory of everything before that day." The totality of human culture and knowledge was erased in an instant due to some mysterious event. The survivors, unmoored from the past, had to relearn existence all the while trying to make their way in a now unfamiliar world. The creative team at Sunrise used the conceit of collective amnesia to visually calibrate The Big O.

Paradigm City occupies a liminal space, positioned between a forgotten past and a nonexistence future. Its inhabitants live in a perpetual present without the comfort of nostalgia or the prospect of a better tomorrow. This world inhibits growth. As a result, people—and places—stagnate.

Outside the domes that house and protect the rich, the infrastructure of Paradigm falls deeper into disrepair. The once towering skyrises crumble against the inexorable march of time; bombed-out buildings, pockmarked and punctured with holes, sink further into obscurity. But even though these environments are bleak and desolate, there's something quietly pleasing about them.

The locations Roger visits in his role as a Negotiator are imbued with a lost history. Time factors heavily into The Big O's symbols and visual motifs. Roger keeps a series of hourglasses in his study. Norman routinely fixes the grandfather clock in the hall. Broken clocks no longer ticking punctuate the cityscape. These patterns are by no means accidental. They serve to highlight the existential loneliness that proliferates a city wrecked by time.

This was all familiar territory for Masaru Ota, the show's art director. Notably, he was also a background artist on Neon Genesis Evangelion and helped give Tokyo-III that eerily relatable yet otherworldly feel. Approaching The Big O with a similar eye, he created environments fit for idle contemplation. Whether it's the denuded forest that surrounds Instro's dilapidated family estate or the coastal buildings that have slipped into the sea, we're encouraged to divorce ourselves from the immediate action to better appreciate the atmosphere.

This emphasis on visual storytelling was such a smart choice. Many episodes of The Big O start in media res and thus place viewers in an uncomfortable position of ignorance. The draw, the captivating force that pulls us through its circuitous narrative, is the desire to unravel the mysteries of Paradigm City. Roger mentions that the citizens are able to cope with the trauma of memory loss "only because they've gotten into the habit of not thinking about it." But that doesn't apply to the audience. In fact, one of the principle joys of The Big O is working through its many enigmas, even if we're not always provided concrete answers.

Like the crumbling castles that captivated and inspired past writers, The Big O provides viewers similar spaces to feel time's inevitable passing and ponder life's ineffable mysteries. In a world that prioritizes nonstop consumption, those quiet moments are invaluable.

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CURTAIN CALL (ADVICE)

BY REE-SET

On the final curtain's rise,
will you be pleased with your goodbyes?
Or will you flee your pre-paved path
to see it all and judge the lies?

As we start again this cycle, can you say you fought the tide --
while drowning in your memories, with head and heart now compromised?

If so, then ask this iteration.
Trade your oil and change your lies
for even just one small correction.
Barter with her for your lives.

THE MEMORY THIEF

BY BABZ

Lieutenant Dan Dastun stood in the expansive main lobby of Paradigm Corporation's headquarters. He checked his watch under the heavy sleeve of his Military Police jacket and groaned when he saw that it was nearly two in the afternoon. The young woman who checked him in half an hour ago said the Executives would be ready for their meeting at two o'clock sharp. As the second hand ushered in a new minute, Dastun sharply exhaled and tightened his jaw in anticipation of the Executives' frustration. Roger Smith was going to be late.

It was always like this when Dastun met Roger at Paradigm HQ. Both of them hated visiting the head of the snake, but Dastun at least acted professionally and showed up early; after all, it was Dastun's job to uphold the honor of the Military Police. But just like when he was on the force, Roger always followed Roger's Rules on Roger's Time. One would hope that cadet training had ironed out those idiosyncrasies, Dastun thought. Those idiosyncrasies are likely why Roger wasn't on the force anymore, and why he went on to be the best Negotiator in Paradigm City.

It was two o'clock. Dastun imagined the icy gazes of the Executives staring him down, asking where their Negotiator was. Gritting his teeth, Dastun straightened his peaked cap and patted his jacket's interior pocket to make sure his box of cigarettes were there. He had a feeling he'd need it after this was all said and done.

Turning towards the lobby entrance, Dastun spotted Roger strolling in, the revolving door still spinning behind him. He was dressed head to toe in black--his usual Negotiator uniform--with his cresting hair and sharp eyebrows looking sharper than usual. While his old friend looked confident strolling in, Dastun knew Roger masked the same uneasiness he had every time he came to HQ for a meeting like this. Dastun still got a chill down his spine every time he visited this austere but opulent lobby, despite his years of service. It always spelled trouble when Roger was here, and Dastun knew Roger found himself in more trouble with Paradigm now than ever before.

Just as Dastun raised his hand to beckon Roger over, a woman with wavy blonde hair and dark eyeglasses dressed all in pink passed him and gracefully strolled towards the lobby entrance. Roger, who removed his sunglasses and tucked them into his breast pocket, smiled knowingly at her. Dastun sensed some familiarity,

but Roger rarely told him about the women he shared company with. Chatting flirtatiously together, the woman politely covered her mouth with her hand to hide a laugh as Roger whispered something to her and grinned. It was time, Dastun thought, to move things along. There was a stack of Military Police paperwork waiting for him back in his office, and he had no intention of lingering in HQ any longer than was strictly necessary.

“Roger Smith,” Dastun growled, marching towards the lovebirds. “You’re late.”

“Dastun!” Roger said warmly as he extended his hand out to his old commanding officer for a handshake. “Sorry if you’ve been waiting long. R. Dorothy disturbed my office hourglasses, and you know I can’t leave a mess at my desk. Roger’s Rules.”

Dastun smirked and gripped Roger’s hands. “I hope you can explain Roger’s Rules to the Executives. I’m sure they’ll be more than sympathetic.”

“If Paradigm Corporation wants my services, then I believe it's their responsibility to also follow my Rules,” Roger said, turning serious. “It’s paramount that all parties act sensibly and understandingly during a negotiation.”

“Well, Mr. Negotiator,” the woman said with a voice that sounded like honey, “Maybe it’s time we find out exactly what you’ll be negotiating.” She gestured towards the elevator to the indoor trolley terminal that allowed for fast travel through the massive HQ. “Shall we proceed, gentlemen?”

The two men shared a glance. Dastun silently nodded to Roger, who began walking towards the elevators. “Lead the way, Ms. Patricia Lovejoy.”

—

After they got off the trolley, Dastun, Roger and Ms. Lovejoy entered the massive conference floor where they found their rotating room already assembled and waiting for them. Ms. Lovejoy opened the door without a word and let Dastun and Roger in. They were greeted by a long table illuminated by banker lights. Three elderly Paradigm Corporation Executives sat at the far end of the table with their hands clasped impatiently and lizard eyes piercing through the green hazy light in Roger’s direction.

“Late again, Mr. Negotiator,” one of them hissed.

“I apologize for my tardiness, but...”

“We are not interested in your excuses, Roger Smith,” another Executive interjected. “We are only interested in the service you can provide us. Really, the best Negotiator in all of Paradigm? We have serious matters of business and state to attend to. Our time cannot be held captive by your impetuous behavior.”

By the look of them, Dastun thought, they didn’t look like they had much time left to waste at all.

Roger and Dastun sat down on the opposite end of the table together while Ms. Lovejoy closed the door behind her, took a seat behind a typewriter and quickly began clacking away, preparing the minutes for the meeting.

“Mr. Smith, we will get straight to brass tacks since we are beginning this meeting late. We have approached you for this grave task since it is a problem only a skilled Negotiator like yourself seems capable of addressing,” the third Executive said haughtily as she pulled out a manilla folder and slid it down the table for Roger to take.

“I’m listening,” Roger said.

“Memories are commodities in short supply after the event of forty years ago. While the young people of this city like yourself have the luxury to form their own and participate in society free from the burden of not knowing who they were decades ago, it is in Paradigm Corporation’s explicit interest to preserve the identities of this city’s senior citizens.”

“Only if those senior citizens live inside your Domes,” Roger shrugged, leaning back in his chair. Dastun glanced at his friend from the corner of his eyes, fighting back the urge to nudge Roger and remind him a conference room in Paradigm HQ wasn’t the place to express his political opinions.

“All the people of Paradigm have their place, Mr. Smith, and it is your place to follow through with the negotiations you’re hired to facilitate. We have already paid your deposit, which you have accepted. You are now an employee of Paradigm Corporation and will act professionally while speaking with your employers.”

“Fine,” said Roger flatly. “Then what, pray tell, have you hired me to negotiate?”

The three Executives looked at each other. Ms. Lovejoy, who had been diligently working at her typewriter, paused. An eerie silence fell over the dark conference room.

“There is a memory thief,” said one of the Executives. “They’re stealing the memories of Paradigm’s retirees.”

“A memory thief? How can you steal someone’s memories?”

All three Executives shifted in their seats in an uncomfortable unison. “We--we are not exactly sure. Earlier this week, Hans Koch, the former head of Paradigm Petroleum, was found outside the Domes. He was a mess, a shell of himself. He could barely put a sentence together and couldn’t remember how he arrived on the streets. Perhaps most disturbingly of all, Hans could not remember who he was. He was a blank slate.”

“A blank slate?” Roger said, sharing a glance with Ms. Lovejoy in the corner.

Dastun cleared his throat. “My men picked him up on G Street. They brought him home to his family where he’s convalescing under the care of an android nurse.”

“I don’t mean to sound crass,” said Roger as he opened the manila envelope and began flipping through its content. “But Mr. Koch is an old man. Memories are precious things to the city’s elderly; but as they move into the winter of their lives, even their new memories begin to fade. It isn’t out of the ordinary for one of Paradigm’s old timers to...”

“He is not the only one. Hans Koch was the fourth Dome-Dweller the Military Police has discovered in this state. He is the second former Paradigm Executive to lose his memories again.”

“Again...”

“Roger Smith,” one of the Executives stood up and pointed towards the Negotiator. “We entrust in you the responsibility to find this memory thief and, with the full cooperation of the Military Police, negotiate an end to their crimes.”

“By your tone,” Roger said, standing up to meet the Executive’s gaze. “I presume you mean for me to negotiate a permanent end. You know that’s not my style.”

“You will see this negotiation to its logical conclusion,” the Executives said in unison. “By any means necessary.”

Ms. Lovejoy stopped typing.

—

Dastun relaxed in his trolley seat, content that the meeting was over. While he didn’t have much to contribute during the faceoff between Paradigm City’s top Negotiator and Paradigm Corporation’s top Executives, he was glad he attended only to keep an eye on Roger. The two of them had attended half a dozen meetings like this before over the last few months where Roger got testy with anyone who spoke with the authority of Paradigm behind them, whether it was Dastun’s commanding officers in the Military Police or the goons who spoke for Alex Rosewater, the Corporation's Chief Executive. He didn’t like them either, but Roger had been uncharacteristically moody lately, like something was going on in his life that he couldn’t tell anyone, not even Dastun. Maybe that new live-in android girlfriend of his had cut into Roger’s famously liberal sleep schedule.

“Roger,” Dastun looked at his old friend staring out the trolley window. “You really gotta watch yourself around those vultures. Even you can’t negotiate your way out of trouble with the top brass.”

“I feel like I’m coming up here more often than I should, Dastun. While I believe it’s a Negotiator’s responsibility to see a job through till the end, it’s not very often

that a client needs my services as often as Paradigm does.”

“Ha,” Dastun laughed. “That’s because they know you’re the best.”

“Hmm.”

“So, who was the girl?”

“What girl?”

“The one in pink taking the minutes--couldn’t keep her eyes off you. She’s a new office flower. I’ve never seen her before.”

“Oh,” Roger chuckled. “You mean ‘Ms. Lovejoy?’ Angelic, isn’t she?”

“Careful, Mr. Negotiator. I’m sure a certain android might imitate jealousy if it knew you had another squeeze at HQ. It’ll start wondering why you come up here all the time.”

Roger rolled his eyes and went back to staring out the window. “What do you think?”

“I’m thinking about all the work I left behind at the office,” Dastun said as he took off his peaked cap and dabbed the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.”

“I mean about a memory thief stealing memories from the elderly.”

“If you want my honest opinion, it sounds like another day in Paradigm City, especially if it’s one I have to spend with you. I’m still filling out paperwork from that Bonny Fraser case last month.”

“Memories are important, Dastun. They’re what remind us of where we came from and who we are.”

“Not the first time I’ve heard you say something like that,” Dastun reached into his inner pocket, pulled out his box of cigarettes and grabbed one with his teeth. “Do you think they let you smoke in here?”

—

It was nearly suppertime, but Reginald Stack wasn’t paying any attention to the old grandfather clock heralding the top of the hour on the other end of his study. He was busy organizing and reorganizing the trinkets on top of his desk. The stacks of paper, pens and weights needed to be in their proper place or else Reginald felt like nothing else could get done. Most importantly, the small framed portrait needed to be just right. It had to face him whenever he sat down, but it couldn’t stare at him.

Reginald picked up the portrait and gazed at it like he did every morning when he woke up and every night before he went to bed. Behind the glass in the gilt frame was the silhouette of a woman in profile. While many silhouettes in Dome manors were of young women with gently sweeping foreheads, pixie noses, gentle-looking

chins, slender necks and soft bosoms, Reginald's was different. The silhouette was of a homelier, older woman whose proportions were fuller and less delicate with a round face, rounder nose and hair pulled back into a bun.

There were memories Reginald knew he had of this woman, forty-year old memories that he could no longer access. Paintings and photographs of Reginald with this mysterious woman filled his great estate in West Dome #5, gathering dust. They showed the two of them as teenagers, young adults and some Reginald swore looked like them when he was in his early fifties. He didn't know her name, but he felt deeply affectionate towards her. Perhaps before whatever happened forty years ago, they were married, but Reginald didn't own a wedding band and couldn't find a marriage license in the Paradigm archives. It was like she was a ghost, haunting his old mansion and quietly reminding him of her lost presence. Reginald, who was never particularly creative, called her "that woman," which frustrated him. He thought she deserved more respect than a common descriptor.

"Master Stack," rang a voice from behind the study's closed door.

"Enter," Reginald hoarsely said, setting down the silhouette in its proper position on his desk. He reached down and turned on his oxygen tank and breathed deeply into its mask.

Five years ago, at the age of 87, Reginald fell ill with viral pneumonia that diminished his lung capacity to where he needed supplemental oxygen. While Paradigm doctors kept him alive, it fast tracked his retirement from Paradigm Pharmaceuticals where he worked for as long as he could remember. He was the director for thirty-five years and sat on Alex Rosewater's Board of Executives for thirty of them. Now 92, Reginald felt like age and the toll of his disease had caught up with him while he tried to learn to endure the solitude of his retirement. It had only been a few months now, but he hoped that it wouldn't continue much longer. Maybe in the end he'd discover the identity of that woman in all the pictures.

The door opened and Reginald's android butler, Harvey, walked into the study. Usually around this time, they would have a silver platter with their master's vegetarian dinner, but this time they had the hallway's telephone.

"Harvey," Reginald squinted his eyes at his mechanical manservant. "Why do you have the telephone? Where's supper?"

"Master Stack, a solicitor has called with an inquiry," Harvey said flatly, their blank white eyes stiffly moved from their master's stare to the telephone they carried.

"A solicitor? After five? Nonsense. Inform them that I'm not interested in whatever they're selling."

"Master Stack, the solicitor said that this was a one time offer. They said that you would be greatly interested in the content of their proposal."

"'The content of the proposal?' Harvey, what in heaven's name are you talking about? Tell them I'm not interested and to not call again."

"Master Stack, the solicitor said that they were calling to inquire about your memories."

"My...?" Reginald felt the air leave his lungs. His throat became dry and tight as he struggled to hold back a cough. Reaching below his desk, he rushed to turn his oxygen tank's valve and clasped the mask over his mouth to regain his breath. Was Harvey malfunctioning? "Bring... bring me the phone, Harvey. Bring it over here, to my... my desk.."

"Yes, Master Stack." Harvey gently placed the phone down in front of Reginald and walked back to the study's door where he awaited further instructions from his elderly master.

Reginald shakily lifted the phone's receiver to his face, not entirely confident that he'd have the air to speak with the mystery caller. "Th-this is Reginald Stack."

"Mr. Stack," a crackly voice said on the other end. "Mr. Reginald Stack of Paradigm Pharmaceuticals?"

"Retired, but this is he."

"I'm sure it's very lonely there, in the Western Domes," the solicitor said. Reginald didn't recognize the voice or gender nor did he appreciate the tone, but he was intrigued. "All by yourself in that great big house with your android slave. No children and no spouse. You don't even have any memories to keep you company."

"Wh-what is this? What are you on about?" Reginald demanded, the knuckles of his liver-spotted hand whitened as he clenched the receiver. "Are-are you just calling to mock an old man in his retirement? I'll have you know I'm--I'm a private citizen now. I don't..."

"No, No, Mr. Stack. No need to get angry. I just needed to make sure it was you," the caller said, taking a cooler tone. "In fact, I sympathize with you."

"S-sympathize?"

"You could say we inhabit a similar demographic. We're dinosaurs, you and I."

"Dinosaurs? What are--"

"Mr. Stack, how would you like to retrieve your memories? Your long lost memories from forty years ago?"

Reginald nearly dropped the receiver. It was like the mystery caller knew that

only moments ago he had been waxing nostalgic at his desk and pondering his life before he forgot who that woman was. While Reginald was curious and even frightened to know more about this enigmatic offer from the solicitor, he was no fool. He had decades of experience making and breaking business deals on behalf of Paradigm Corporation's pharmaceuticals branch. He knew to be skeptical when someone was promising a panacea for a pandemic like the amnesia in Paradigm City.

"Are you after my money?" Reginald whispered into the receiver, turning his back on his butler who watched him from across the room. "Are you trying to extort an old man in his twilight years? I'll assure you that--"

"Oh, Mr. Stack," the caller cooed on the other line. "Don't be so crude. Wealth is immaterial to me. If it was your money I wanted, I would have called Rosewater before I called you."

"Then what are you after? What do you want from me? What do you know about my memories?"

"Your memories? Nothing at all except I can return them to you."

Reginald tried but failed to stifle a cough. He held the receiver to his chest as he covered his mouth with a bony fist and hacked out what remained of his lungs. Harvey jolted towards their master and supported him as they reached for the tank underneath the desk. The android handed Reginald his mask, who greedily breathed in the supplemental oxygen. After he felt like he regained his breath, Reginald brought the phone back to his ear and waved Harvey away. "I'm--I'm sorry. Where can I meet you?"

"Meet me at the intersection of Twelfth and G Street Northwest in one hour. Come alone. Your former employer doesn't need to know about this special deal."

—

After donning his heavy travel coat with Harvey's help, Reginald tried to get comfortable in the backseat of his long, wide black landshark car while Harvey entered the driver seat. The android adjusted the mirrors and looked back at Reginald. "Ready, Master Stack?"

"Yes, Harvey. Let's go," Reginald said, looking out the window at the fountain on his manicured green lawn.

They drove through the estate's golden gates, down the road and through West Dome #5's exit. Reginald never liked to leave the Domes if he could help it. The oppressive grey skies the working people in Paradigm lived under gave him a headache, and the air was cold and heavy from the industries they labored in.

When Reginald awoke from the haze of his newfound amnesia, he spent the first part of his life outside the Domes rebuilding Paradigm's healthcare infrastructure and leading its scientists in reinventing life saving medications from the old world. Reginald possessed fragments of memories that led to the reintroduction of penicillin and vaccines for tetanus, measles, mumps and several strains of influenza. While he started in the lap of luxury, many of those who enjoyed the good life before the event lost it along with their memories. It was Reginald's ingenuity and tenacity that impressed Gordon Rosewater and allowed him to keep what he had while the Domes were being built over it.

"Sir," Harvey said, breaking Reginald's reminiscing. "We're here. The intersection of Twelfth and G Street Northwest."

Harvey parked the car by the curb next to an abandoned hotel. As the android got out and opened the door for Reginald, the old man noticed that everything on the intersection looked abandoned. Shuttered windows pocked the high rise building that looked like rows of tombstones. Storefronts on the street were stripped and filled with rubbish. To Reginald, it looked like these streets of an unfamiliar Paradigm had remained uninhabited for decades at the very least.

"Harvey, are you sure this is the right intersection?" Reginald said while he stared up at the top floors of the buildings that surrounded then. "There's absolutely no one here."

"Master Stack," Harvey pointed across the street towards a greyed out bar. Even from this distance, Reginald could see a flickering orange light in the bar's dusty windows. It was a candle, he realized. That was the sign the solicitor told him to look out for.

"I'll be off now, Harvey. The solicitor promised that this appointment won't last long. Meet me here in exactly one hour, and don't be late."

"May I at least assist you in carrying your oxygen tank across the street, sir?"

"No, Harvey, I won't be needing it. I'd rather face this like a man," Reginald chuckled, grinning wryly at the android.

With that, he closed the car door and strutted down the street towards the faint glow of the candle. As he approached, he saw through the window a burly shape illuminated by the dull light stand up and disappear deeper into the darkness. Uneasy about the mysterious figure, Reginald felt his throat tighten. He held back a cough and knocked on the door, which eerily creaked open.

"H-hello?" Reginald stammered. "Hello? Is anyone here? This is Reginald Sta--"

"Ah, Mr. Reginald Stack," came the solicitor's voice, still grainy from what sounded like mechanical interference. "You came. Very smart of you. Please come in and make yourself comfortable."

Reginald carefully removed his coat and looked around for a place to hang it up.

The bar looked desolate, like it hadn't been occupied for as far back as Reginald could remember. The only thing that hinted at occupancy was the small candle in the window and a chair devoid of dust at the other end of the room where he saw the shadow of a man get up and vanish. The hair on the back of his neck started standing on end.

"Where are you? I-I can't see you..."

"I'm not here, Mr. Stack, but I am present. Would you kindly walk over to the bar?"

Reginald did as he was told and, at the long bar front, he found a small speaker next to a buzzer with a red button. Reginald leaned over the bar and looked around then returned his attention to the speaker. "Is that you?" he asked cautiously.

"My presence isn't necessary for the procedure, Mr. Stack. Please press the red button next to the speaker. It will alert my men and let them know you're ready to proceed."

"Your men? Was that who I..."

"Press the button, Mr. Stack."

Shakily pushing his thumb down on the button, a loud buzz filled the room. Reginald heard a door open down the hallway behind the bar and a set of footsteps approach him. Two men dressed in what looked like hooded olive raincoats and white surgical masks opened a door next to him. One was very large and tall, unmistakably the person Reginald had seen in the window, and the other was thin and short.

"Reggie Stack," the thin man said in a sickly sweet voice. "So, so good that you've joined us today. We will escort you to the memory chamber for your procedure."

The thin man held out his hand for Reginald's coat, who held it tightly to his chest while he took in the figures who appeared out of the shadows to assist him. "If I go with you, I'll get my memories back? My memories from forty years ago?"

"You have nothing to fear, Mr. Stack. My men are experts in handling old fogeys like yourself. Go along now. Follow them to the memory chamber. The clock is ticking, but never fear. We'll have you finished up in no time at all," the solicitor said dismissively.

Reginald handed the thin man his coat and, as soon as he had, the big man grabbed his wrist. There was a gentleness behind his grasp that suggested he was familiar with geriatic care or, at the very least, had handled people like Reginald several times before.

The two men guided Reginald down the hallway they came from and towards a steely elevator door. There were butterflies in Reginald's stomach as he took everything in. This hardly seemed like a professional operation; but if this was a secret miracle cure to his amnesia, then he imagined that the procedure wouldn't happen at Paradigm General Hospital in Central Dome #1. Regardless of the drabbines of the bar and the eccentricities of the solicitor and their men, Reginald was ready to see this through to the end. It was the most exciting thing he'd done in the months since his retirement.

At the elevator, the thin man met Reginald's eyes as his surgical mask contorted over a smile. "Ready?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

The tall man activated the lift, and the three of them stepped into its padded interior. The air felt hot and heavy as they began to descend. Trying to focus on his breathing, Reginald was curious just how deep below street level they were going. He knew there were tunnels beneath Paradigm, but he would never have guessed an old bar like this would be the front for something so subterranean. Suddenly, the elevator stopped with a jolt that almost caused Reginald to fall, but the tall man caught him with a tree-trunk sized arm and balanced the old man and tightened his grip on his shoulder.

"Twinkle, twinkle, Reggie Stack ," the thin man sang and flashed wild eyes at Reginald that scared him. "Time to get your old self back!"

The elevator doors opened with a chime, and the three men stepped out and into a cold, barren hallway with sheet metal walls and heavy-looking hangar doors at the other end. The only fixture was a hanging megaphone speaker above the doors. A muffled noise emanated from the speaker followed by a short melody that filled Reginald with a surprising rush of nostalgia as he and the two men walked down the hall.

"Relax, Mr. Stack. I'm right here with you," the solicitor said through the speaker. "You need to breathe. You look tense. There's no need to worry. You'll have your old memories back when all this is over. Won't it be nice to recall your childhood again? Won't it be nice to remember what it was like to be young and in love? That's it, breathe. The procedure won't work if you're tense. Just focus on my voice."

Reginald gawked while the solicitor tried to soothe him. Maybe this wasn't right. Maybe he shouldn't have agreed to all of this; or, at the very least, jumped on it so soon. Over the phone, the solicitor's offer sounded so intoxicating, so tailor-made to draw in an old, lonely man like Reginald. In all his months in retirement, he never entertained one visitor. He felt like Paradigm had forgotten about him, despite all the work he accomplished in its name. If he was going to languish alone,

then he wanted to at least be able to reflect back on something else besides his work and, ideally, contextualize the success his work brought him. It was like the solicitor knew that when they called and made their fantastical promise.

When Reginald started working for Paradigm Corporation, before it had solidified its monopoly, he remembered still-existing independent businesses trying to bargain their way into Gordon Rosewater's good graces. They made offers and promises they couldn't possibly keep to stay relevant, to have a seat at the table, to manipulate Paradigm's Negotiators into letting them keep a modicum of power. Now, in his twilight years, Reginald realized that he might have fallen for a false promise that his younger self would have never bought.

Struggling with second guesses and doubts, that woman's face filled his mind, clearing the clouds like the sun after a summer rain. This might be dodgy, Reginald thought, but it didn't matter. The solicitor never asked for payment or threatened extortion nor did their men, while odd, try to hurt or take advantage of him. Certainly he was safe, he thought. And even if he wasn't, and the two men were goose-stepping him towards his end, Reginald found grim comfort in not having to return to his house in West Dome #5 with only Harvey, weak lungs and the ghost of that woman for company. He had a long life. If this was it, it was it; if it wasn't, he would have his memories back.

As they reached the hanger doors, Reginald relaxed his shoulders and breathed more deeply with less trouble than he had in years.

"Ah, very good, Mr. Stack," the solicitor said. "Now keep that feeling going. We will begin the procedure. Ray, open cockpit doors."

"C-cockpit?" Reginald stammered, his composure disappearing instantly as he stared whitefaced at the speaker above his head.

The thin man rhythmically pounded the doors, and they opened slowly with a hydraulic hiss and clammer of metal scraping against metal. Inside was a round recession with a chair at its center. Around the chair was a half circle that looked like dramatic arm rests. There were buttons, switches and flickering colorful lights that shined in the darkness. Reginald looked at the chair, then to the two men. "What is this? What am I supposed to do here?"

"Take a seat, Reggie," the thin man said.

The tall man picked Reginald off his feet, holding him like a baby, and descended the recess towards the chair. Once he had Reginald sitting down, he started to move around the chamber, flicking switches up and down, pressing buttons in sequences that Reginald thought looked like nonsense. While he watched his partner work, the thin man looked down at Reginald with his bright eyes and waved. "Comfy, Reg?"

"I, well, umm..." Reginald stuttered, darting his eyes back and forth from one man to another. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Are you done, Ray?" the thin man asked the tall man, who nodded and walked back into the hallway after he finished calibrating the chamber. "Hey, Reggie, yeah, look at me. Get your arms up on the thing around your pilot seat.

"Like this?" Reginald asked as he slowly lifted his arms and put them on the rest.

As soon as his arms relaxed, two balls from behind the chair rolled across the rest from the back of the chair and stopped next to his hands. The balls opened and a pair of stick controllers complete with triggers shot out. Surprised, Reginald shakely looked at the controllers then back at the two men in the hallway. The thin man mimed grabbing the sticks, and Reginald followed his commands. Once he had his grip, the balls began to shift and recede into the rest, pulling Reginald's arms down with them; then, with a snap, thick restraints grabbed onto his wrists. A steel brace snapped around his waist and held him tightly to the chair. "Wait, what?" he exclaimed as he tried to resist his restraints. "Let me go this instant! Th-this isn't..."

Reginald couldn't finish his words, the air had left his lungs and he began to cough.

"Happy memories, Reg," the thin man said while the doors closed and Reginald was left alone in the dark

Suddenly, a round screen lit up in front of the old man, its staticy background flickered and danced while words crawled across the monitor: CAST IN THE NAME OF GOD, YE... But before Reginald could finish reading the text, the chamber shook like there was something massive moving outside, breaking through steel and concrete. It was so loud that Reginald could barely hear the shouts, pops and pounding happening just outside the bay doors, but he was more concerned with regaining his breath.

"B-breathe," he told himself between coughs. "Breathe. You're fine..."

Moments went by while Reginald hacked and wheezed in the thick, dark silence of the memory chamber. Once he felt like he had the air back in his lungs, he wiggled in his restraints with what little energy his body could muster. His thin arms and waist still weren't enough to slip out, no matter how much he tried. Then, without warning, a white hot flash of pain jolted through Reginald's neck and shoulder blades, like nine needles had simultaneously stabbed into him. Reginald's body tensed up and his eyes rolled back into his skull. Whatever had him in his clutches pulled his paralyzed body back into the chair. He could feel himself slipping into unconsciousness.

Falling into a stupor, Reginald saw flashes of life events dart back and forth in no sequential order. There he was on the phone with the solicitor earlier this evening.

Then he was in an HQ boardroom twenty years ago with other heads of the industrial sector while Alex Rosewater discussed city and corporate policy mundanities. The taste and smell of the good coffee he had while he vacationed near Electric City to recover from his pneumonia filled his mouth and nose. All of these random life events and sensations spun through Reginald's mind, blurring together then fading.

He couldn't see anything that looked like an older memory from before forty years ago. In fact, it felt like whatever had seized him in this chair was removing his memories from after the cataclysm. He remembered shaking Harvey's hand shortly after acquiring them, but he couldn't remember where anymore. Had it been Paradigm Planners or was it Paradigm Protection? Reginald couldn't remember, and the harder he thought and fought to access his memories, the more he felt them slipping away. The longer he sat trapped in the chair, the more he struggled to understand how he ended up there in the first place. Reginald was losing himself, and he was too weak, too old and too unwilling to stop it.

That woman's face appeared in the abyss of his mind. Reginald could tell it was her because of the shape, the distinctive bun on top of her head, but he couldn't make out her face. She was featureless, frozen in a pose he'd seen her in every day in the portraits around his empty manor. It wasn't a memory of her, it was a memory of a shot in time he couldn't remember. As her figure blurred and vanished into the inky blackness of his subconscious, drool dribbled out from the corners of his mouth and dripped onto his shirt and pants. That woman was gone, and Reginald was alone.

While the cacophony of memory blew through what remained of Reginald's mind, he was just cognizant enough to notice the hanger doors slowly open. Light from the hallway shown on Reginald like a spotlight on a stage actor. The broad-shouldered silhouette of a man emerged from the light as Reginald struggled to remain conscious and keep himself from slipping away completely. As the man descended the recess and approached him, Reginald fought to signal for help, begging for rescue before the chamber took everything from him.

"Reginald Stack," a cool, authoritative voice said, piercing through the numbing void that was left of Reginald's mind. "My name is Roger Smith, and I'm here to rescue you."

Reginald only spittled and sputtered in response. He tried flexing his fingers to show he was restrained. Roger darted behind the chair and yanked on whatever held Reginald down and caused the needling pain in his back. He felt skin break as Roger grunted and pulled behind him and, slowly, he felt the pain subside. Had he been wired into something? His head ached and throbbed like he had an aggressive hangover, but Reginald was conscious again and, to his relief, could at least remember his name. Relinquished from whatever had held him back, the restraints on his wrists and waist clicked open and receded into the rest.

"Are you all right, Mr. Stack?" Roger asked as he helped the old man off the chair.

"Y-yes, th-thank you, I..."

"Don't thank me yet. This isn't over."

Roger lifted the old man's arm over his shoulder and dragged him towards the exit. The chamber began to shake violently, like it was coming alive and trying to get loose. Bracing himself, Roger yelled for Reginald to hold on tight and jumped out of the chamber and into the hallway before it broke off with a loud moan that sounded like a wailing animal. The tall man and thin man were sprawled out unconscious on the floor, a handgun and metal pipe next to them. Bullet holes riddled the sheet metal walls and floor, and Reginald realized the commotion he heard while trapped in the chamber had been a struggle between the two men and his rescuer. Still, that didn't explain the loud crash he heard, like something giant had pierced the bunker they were in.

"Impressive display, Mr. Negotiator," the solicitor's voice hissed through the crooked speaker that barely held onto the ceiling above them. "You might have saved the old man, or whatever's left of him, but his memories were just enough to fuel it! It has awakened, and there's nothing you can do to stop it!"

"Using memories to feed an old Megadeus archetype wasn't something I was expecting," Roger said while he rested Reginald against the wall. "Whoever or whatever you are, I won't let you abuse this city's elderly anymore, whether they live inside or outside the Domes!"

"Ha! And what exactly do you intend to do about it? Soon enough, you'll be buried under a pile of rubble!"

Reginald groaned as he used what little strength he had left to look up at Roger. Striking a dramatic pose, Roger swung his arm close to his face and flashed a shiny wristwatch that glimmered blue in the flickering fluorescent hallway light. The Negotiator looked down at Reginald, met his gaze and grinned. In a commanding voice, he shouted into his watch, "Big O, it's showtime!"

No Side.

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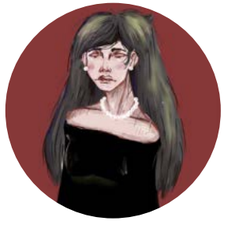

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CAST IN THE NAME OF GOD, YE NOT GUILTY.